

Highly charged

Such was the atmosphere at this year's Rhino Charge. Jacqueline Mwangi was there, following the fortunes of the trail-blazing KWS-EAWLS team.

The Rhino Charge, the annual Kenyan fund-raising event that takes the form of a gruelling off-road motoring challenge, this year took place at on the Siana Group Ranch bordering the Maasai Mara National Reserve on 1 June, raising a record sum of more than KSh 17-million (the equivalent of roughly US\$ 218,000).

Proceeds from this hugely popular event go (as always) towards the fencing of the Aberdare Conservation Area and National Park. Already, half of the planned 320-km-long fence is in place; the remaining 160-km stretch expected to be completed by 2005.

The purpose of the fence is to protect this priceless expanse of natural forest from illegal encroachment, while pre-empting human-wildlife conflict and providing a safe haven for wildlife – and for the area's black rhinos, most especially.

Participation in the Rhino Charge is not for the faint-hearted. A nerve-wracking event even to watch, it sees competitors attempt to blaze a direct trail between 13 checkpoints or 'guard' posts, sited anywhere from three to 14 km apart and separated by extremely rugged terrain, in the shortest distance possible and in the shortest time.

Entrants must field vehicles with not less than four wheels (and preferably with deep-grooved, heavy-duty tyres), a roll bar, a road license, fuel in the tank, and a team of up to six members, including a driver, co-driver, navigator, and three 'spotters' responsible for selecting – on the spur of the moment, since the route itself is kept secret until the start – the best course to steer over and through the



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forbidding landscape.

Not even the venue is revealed to participants until the eve of the event. So there is no question of any reconnaissance beforehand, and no team starts out with a competitive edge. Just to finish the event is accounted a triumph. But the ultimate triumph – and the one that makes the Rhino Charge so special – rests in how much money you can raise for conservation in the process.

In the event, only 23 of the 55 starters completed the course. The team that raised the biggest sum in cash sponsorship – KSh 2,730,099 (about US\$ 35,000) in all – was that of Mike and Sarah Higgins, in Car No. 22, a Lada Niva. Next, in terms of funds raised, came the team of Allan McKittrick, Bruce Knight and Charlie Stubbs, in Car No. 5, a Range Rover Buggy, with a haul of KSh 1,325,695. And they were followed by Sean Avery and Derek Dames, in Car No. 38, a Land-Rover, who raised KSh 1,296,350.

The overall winner – on the road (or, rather off it) – was the rallying veteran Rob

Collinge, in Car No. 33, a Range Rover pick-up, who in visiting all 13 checkpoints clocked up just 57.71 km in 8 hours 29 seconds. The shortest possible distance by compass was just short of 50 km.

• The combined Kenya Wildlife Service(KWS)-East African Wild Life Society (EAWLS) 'Kifaru' team, the first entry in any Rhino Charge from within the conservation field, was (despite its 'L' stickers) far from daunted by the illustrious competition it had to face.

Indeed, its vehicle – a 40-year-old Land-Rover, No. 53, driven by Philp Holli and navigated by Paula Kahumbu – finished in seventeenth place overall, clocking up 94.213 km in nine hours 55 seconds. This was a considerable feat for a '109 Series' vehicle that, on standard tyres and with a conspicuous lack of special modifications, had been given very little chance of completing the course.

In terms of funds raised, the KWS-EAWLS team was placed a highly creditable fourth, with KSh 1,036,605 (the equivalent of about US\$ 13,300). Team sponsors included Somak Travel, Mara Sopa, EA Portland Cement, Multichoice, Mastermind, Heritage Hotels, Ecoforum, The Tamarind Group, Kenya Alliance, Lets Go Travel, and Colour Print, as well as the African Wildlife Foundation, International Fund for Animal Welfare, and the Born Free Foundation.

Other sponsors that contributed towards the needs of the team and its supporters on the ground included Guerba Travel, Kenchic, Spin Knit Dairy, Wananchi On Line, Carbacid, and the Highlands Mineral Water Company. Essential inputs, in getting the vehicle ready for the event, came from Glenn Mathews' 4 x 4 Centre, Firestone EA, Gethin and Dawson, and Caltex Oil, as well as from various private donors.

Rafting for rhinos

A Ugandan rhino sanctuary will be brought another big step closer to reality, with the staging – on 1 September – of the Nile River Explorers' (NRE) Raft Race.

Run on the Victoria Nile near Jinja, the Raft Race is to become an annual event through which to raise funds for the development – by Rhino Fund Uganda – of a new 80-square-kilometre rhino sanctuary in Nakosongola District, half way between Kampala and Murchison Falls National Park.

Over 'Raft Race weekend', visitors can expect a party atmosphere in Jinja, whose various hotels and resorts – including

the Gately on Nile, the Kingfisher Safari Resort, the Crested Crane Hotel, Bujagali Speke's Camp, the Jinja Nile, the Samuka Island Camp and the NRE's own campsites – will be offering a wide range of activities to suit all tastes and pockets.

This year's inaugural event also marks the beginning of a month-long festival of tourism-related activities across Uganda, culminating in celebrations – on 27 September (World Tourism Day) – of 50 years of conservation in a country whose Murchison Falls and Queen Elizabeth National Parks were both founded in 1952.

Individuals or organisations wishing to take part in, or simply wanting further information on, the 2002 Raft Race, can contact Nile River Explorers at <rafting@starcom.co.ug>.

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